

Keeping Cops on the Street

with

Regional Processing

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Prince George's County, Maryland, established in 1696, covers almost 500 square miles and has a population of 801,515 in its 38 communities, towns, and cities. Four agencies are responsible for public safety in the county: the Prince George's County Police Department, the Fire Department, the Department of Corrections, and the Office of the Sheriff. There are also 24 individual municipal police agencies and state and federal law enforcement agencies in these communities. In the past, these agencies worked primarily independently of each other, making approximately 40,000 arrests annually.

Problems with Processing of Arrestees

As the county grew in terms of both population and criminal activity, county administrators began to reevaluate the county's use of resources and its way of handling arrested persons. For many decades, the task of processing arrested persons had been a public safety concern. As early as 1979, public safety agencies in Prince George's County attempted to address the problems and inefficiencies of a decentralized arrest processing system. At that time, public safety officials noted that arrest processing procedures were time-consuming, inefficient, hazardous to officers, and fragmented across individual agencies.

Major concerns centered on a variety of procedures. Arresting officers were responsible for completing all documents related to arrest and booking. The result was a very high level of errors and omissions on both arrest reports and fingerprint cards. Problems included the following:

- **Fingerprinting.** Arresting officers used ink to fingerprint each offender three times, once each on federal, state, and local fingerprint cards. A high proportion of these prints were difficult to classify or could not be classified at all because of inconsistencies resulting from rolling the same finger repeatedly in ink.

- **Photographing.** Photographs of arrestees were captured using expensive 35mm or 70mm still photography, which then had to be processed, resulting in the temporary inaccessibility of photos to other agencies that might otherwise use them for photo spreads or line-ups.
- **Hand-writing arrest reports.** All arrest reports documenting details such as the arrestee/suspect's name, vital information, statement of charges, and incident information were handwritten repeatedly three or four times for each arrest and for each individual arrested. An officer with multiple arrests on one case could end up completing 15 separate handwritten documents that contained repetitive text and information.
- **Waiting for a District Court Commissioner.** In the next step, the arresting officer had to wait for an available District Court Commissioner for an initial appearance hearing, which is required by Maryland State Law. At times, depending on Commissioner availability, the officer would have to take the offender to another location, which extended the amount of time the officer was off patrol.
- **Transporting inmates.** After the hearing, arrestees who were not released on personal recognizance or bond were committed to the custody of the Department of Corrections. In such cases, the arresting officer would have to transport the committed arrestee to the correctional facility in Upper Marlboro or keep him in custody at the police facility and wait for transportation assistance from the sheriff or the Department of Corrections. Because of the number of law enforcement agencies operating in the county, it was difficult to arrange for timely pick-ups to a correctional facility. A committed arrestee often had to wait for several more hours at the police facility, requiring an arresting officer to maintain custody even after the processing was complete.
- **Injuries to officers and arrestees.** With arresting officers handling and processing their own prisoners, law enforcement agencies in the county dealt constantly with incidents that resulted in injury. The most serious occurred in 1978, when two police officers were killed by gunfire in a police processing area. The officers were shot and killed by an arrestee who obtained and used one of the officer's service revolvers while being processed. This was one of the many incidents in which there were allegations of excessive force being used against prisoners being processed.

In addition, arrestees were processed at multiple police facilities, which used different report formats, a variety of arrest photographs, and inconsistent fingerprinting methods. The time from arrest to release or commitment to the custody of the Department of Corrections ranged from 3 to 6 hours on average. The arresting officer was kept of patrol the entire time, often for the remainder of the shift, or even beyond it, thus requiring overtime pay.

The Solution: County-Wide Processing

Our Regional Processing Initiative was developed as an innovative approach to prisoner processing in response to these problems. In July 1996, a committee was formed to evaluate prisoner processing in the county and to develop a comprehensive approach to addressing the many public safety issues.

The committee was formed with representatives from all of the Prince George's County public safety agencies, the county's Office of Management and Budget and Office of Central Services, Maryland state law enforcement agencies, the Fifth District Court for Maryland, various municipal law enforcement agencies, and other state agencies. After a 4-month planning phase, the committee announced an initiative that allowed any law enforcement agency (federal, state, or local) placing a person under arrest in Prince George's County to process the arrestee at any one of three regional processing locations. The processing sites were strategically located, one each in the northern, central and southern areas of the county. The three sites provided easy access for any law enforcement agency operating in the county to deliver prisoners for processing.

Based on the concerns identified with the previous system, the goals for the Regional Processing Initiative were as follows:

- To reduce the time it takes police officers to process a prisoner and return to their street duties. By returning police officers to street patrol, planners expected a reduction in crime and an increase in arrests. Jurisdictions around the country that used a central prisoner processing concept had experienced as much as a 25% increase in arrests.
- To limit the probability of confrontation during processing, thus reducing potential conflicts and the injury of either suspects and police. A neutral Department of Corrections processing officer was expected to reduce confrontations between police and arrestees in custody. Excessive force complaints and resulting civil litigation were expected to decrease as there would be less contact between the arrestee and the arresting officer during processing.
- To automate prisoner processing and eliminate the duplication that had occurred in data collection, thus improving the entire process for law enforcement officers, commissioners/courts, and corrections. Creating an automated process and communicating with a central database was expected to ensure the positive identification of offenders. Identification would occur through the use of digitally captured fingerprints linked to a state database. Automation would eliminate the redundancy involved in collecting multiple data for arrest booking and reduce the inaccuracies.

Data systems interface. The new, totally automated booking system created an interface with all police agencies, District Court Commissioners, state records, and corrections. The system was integrated with Maryland's Automated Arrest Booking system. It included inkless fingerprint scanning with simultaneous transmission to the state fingerprint repository, the county's Regional Area Fingerprint Identification Scanning system, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Mug

shots were replaced by video imaging that is electronically transmitted to the state as well as stored locally. Video images and arrest information are accessible by any police facility, regardless of where an arrestee was processed.

The automated booking system allows officers to enter data on arrestees and offenses one time at the booking center. Data screens for all other agencies, including Corrections and Court Commissioners, are automatically populated as a result of this initial data entry.

The automated data collection program is generic in its design to allow any law enforcement agency operating within the county to generate necessary reports containing its own letterhead and agency identification numbers. The program is also designed to interface with the courts and state records systems to create a network of communication and allow all agencies to share vital prisoner information.

Streamlined procedures. After an arrest, the arresting law enforcement agency officer arrives with the arrestee at a Regional Booking Center. Correctional staff initiate the Automated Booking System by collecting property, taking fingerprints and photos, and recording initial information in an automated format. The law enforcement officer can then leave the intake area and go to a booking room to begin writing reports such as the Statement of Charges, Statement of Probable Cause, and Arrest Report. All information initially collected in the automated format is used in all of the officers' reports, reducing duplication.

As soon as the reports are completed, the law enforcement officer can return to street patrol. The correctional officer checks the criminal history and completes the process by taking the arrest documents and the prisoner to district court for an Initial Appearance Hearing. If the arrestee is committed to custody, the Department of Corrections arranges transportation to the detention center. If the arrestee is not committed to custody, the correctional officer checks the criminal history again to ensure there are no other pending charges, returns all property, and releases the person.

Costs and Benefits

The law enforcement agencies that use the regional processing sites benefit significantly from the program—and so does the community. The efficient handling of each arrestee allows the patrol officer to return to the community in a little over an hour.

The new processing method has also virtually eliminated the confrontations that resulted in conflict and injury. At the regional processing locations, the arresting officer is separated from the arrestee on entering the processing area. There have been no injuries to any police officer nor any use of force complaints related to processing since the program began. More than 72,000 prisoners have been processed at regional processing locations since the first site opened in October 1996.

The process of conducting criminal history checks on-site before the Initial Appearance Hearing has allowed correctional officers to identify arrestees with open warrant charges. While the arrestee is still in custody, these charges can be satisfied and the warrant closed. Since initiating this phase of the program in October 1998, more than 19,700 arrestees with open warrants have been identified and processed.

The most significant achievement has been the development of the Automated Booking System. Online data entry and communication have created an efficient, user-friendly system that handles arrestees more efficiently and meets the data needs of all the organizations involved. The accurate and ample information provided during the Initial Appearance Hearing also gives the District Court Commissioner more options for releasing individuals on their own recognizance and reduce intake at the Department of Corrections.

The municipal police agencies, which account for approximately 23% of the arrests in the county, were approached after a year of using the automated system at one regional processing site and agreed to assist with staffing support. This "shared staffing" began in January 1998 and is based on the percentage of use by each municipal agency. The concept has been implemented at each regional site and has also been enhanced with support from state law enforcement agencies.

The reduction in processing time created by the Regional Processing Initiative equals an estimated 195,000 to 340,000 in staffing hours that have potentially been saved. Estimated cost savings use the top pay of a Prince George's County Police Department Corporal (straight time; no overtime = \$26.67 per hour) to show potential police staff savings based on the 70,000 arrests processed at regional processing sites. If overtime rates were applied, since many of the previous arrests involved overtime, the potential cost savings would be about 50% percent greater.

A comparison of previous arrest processing time involving police officers (estimated using an average of 5 hours; actual times ranged from 3 to 6 hours) and the current processing time for officers (1.2 hours) demonstrates our success in returning officers to patrol. (See Table 1.) We anticipate that processing time will continue to decrease.

Table 1. Officer downtime savings with regional processing	
Previous processing time (70,000 arrests x 5 hrs./officer)	Current processing time (70,000 arrests x 1.2 hrs./officer)
350,000 police officer hours	84,000 police officer hours
266,000 downtime hours saved	

Uniform Crime Report data for Prince George's County from 1996 through 2000 show a continuous reduction in crime since the first regional processing site was opened in October 1996. (See Tables 2 and 3.)

Table 2. Prince George's County Police UCR Crime Index Report, Category 1 Offenses					
	2000	1999	1998	1997	1996
Homicide	67	88	104	77	132
Forcible rape	198	236	262	279	296
Robbery	2,540	2,135	2,722	2,813	3,466
Aggravated Assault	3,698	3,478	3,878	3,142	3,413
Total Violent Crime	6,503	5,937	6,966	6,311	7,307

Table 3. Crime Rate Index (crimes per 1,000 residents)						
	2000	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995
Prince George's County	53.6	53.0	58.6	57.1	64.3	67.0

Obstacles to Replicating the System

Agencies interested in replicating the Prince George's County program would need to consider the following issues:

- The Automated Booking System, with its unique format for incident-based report writing, is a Windows-based computer program that can be installed on any compatible system. A potential obstacle is an agency's ability to develop generic forms and reports. This is necessary to eliminate redundancy among law enforcement agencies' needs within a specific geographical area.
- The booking facility must be designed to separate arresting officers from arrestees, thus reducing potential conflict. This requires a report/booking room and a separate processing area operated by staff other than arresting officers.
- Development and implementation time are possible obstacles. This program was developed with the support of multiple agencies. The routine processing of prisoners within the county was reshaped, which required policy and procedure changes.

- Training requirements are substantial. The Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commission approved all training developed for the booking system. Currently, 39 law enforcement agencies use the regional processing sites. Approximately 1,400 Prince George's County Police Officers received training in the Automated Booking System, and approximately 350 officers from the municipal, state, and federal law enforcement agencies that operate in the county have been trained. A total of 6,800 training hours were conducted to implement the Automated Booking System.

Net Results: Savings and Safety

The Regional Processing Initiative has been a successful approach to creating a more efficient and effective prisoner processing system in Prince George's County. Several key factors were considered during its development and have contributed to its success. The complexity of operations required a well-defined plan. Coordinating the effort took time, cooperation from multiple agencies at all levels, and funding from the county government to build and design the planned processing locations.

Increased police presence in the community helps stop criminal activity. The direct result is a reduction in crime and safer communities. Because of this, there is a nationwide effort to put additional police officers on the street faster and decrease the overtime costs associated with processing arrestees.

The citizens of Prince George's County have benefitted from a reduction in criminal activity as a result of this initiative. Safe communities open the door for business opportunities, encourage population growth, and improve the overall economy. Our Regional Processing Initiative is cutting costs and Keeping Cops on the Street. ■

For more information:

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